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THOUGHTS ON THE ABUSE

OF

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE,

AS

APPLIED TO RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS;

WITH

Some Observations addressed to

THE PEOPLE CALLED QUAKERS.

BY JOHN HANCOCK.

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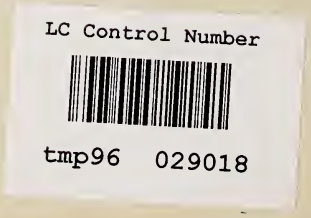

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With some observations addressed to

THE PEOPLE CALLED QUAKERS.

I AM fully sensible, that, in the present day, much reproach attaches to speaking what we are persuaded is the truth, if it happen to thwart commonly received, and deeply rooted prejudices. I know many have not been backward to throw a full share of this reproach on me, on account of my former publications: yet I am not deterred from expressing what appears to me to be truth. If my sentiments on sundry important subjects do not meet with present reception, a time may come, when truth may be more carefully, and with less prejudice, sought after. Whether this time may soon arrive, or whether the day be yet far distant, and that I may never live to see this happy season, it is both unnecessary and impossible for me to ascertain.

The present time is only mine, and therefore I am willing to use time, while it is afforded to me, to make some additional observations on subjects, of which I conceive it is of importance to have clearer views. Possibly my hints may hereafter

after tend to stir up a more close examination into these matters, even although at present they should be but little attended to. I have not a rage for proselytism. It has often produced much fierce zeal, and ungodly contention. When those who were actuated by it, were even aiming to do right, they have, by enlisting the violent passions in its service, often introduced a train of evil consequences, and by this mean only substituted one system of errors under the assumed name of reformation, in the place of more ancient errors—neither do I seek the honour that comes from men, and consequently I am less moved by the obloquy attendant on a public avowal of my sentiments. For it has happened to all, in every successive age, who have made attempts for reform, that they have met with reproach, and have had their views misunderstood—but the strife of tongues may be overcome by patient endurance, and christian fortitude; and, in the end, wisdom has been justified of her meek, but resolutely determined followers.

The subject on which I now address the public, has long engaged my attention. I think it is of great importance; for, in my apprehension, many injurious mistakes have arisen from the misapplication of figurative language. It has led to the adoption of a train of ideas, either without a precise meaning, or with mistaken ones; and when error once gets possession of the human mind, and has crept in with our best feelings, it possesses a seeming sanctity, that prevents many from attempting to remove it. To this cause, I attribute the timidity manifested by many well meaning people to examine the foundation of their belief. They, with a good share of sincerity of intention, let in a culpable timidity, and are afraid to examine; and if a thought arises, that looks like a doubt, they hasten to exclude it. This timidity stops all further enquiry in their minds; and the next step is not unfrequently to censure others, who think it right for them to examine more narrowly into the foundation of what they have received for truth.

truth. Hence we often find many who now strenuously oppose all enquiry, lest it may lead to innovation, acknowledging that they once had similar sentiments floating through their minds.

I am ready to conclude, that if the motives for rejecting such sentiments were closely examined into, a kind of indolence of mind, and a fear to walk in a path of singularity generally spoken against, would often be found to lie concealed among the secret causes which determined them to reject such sentiments. The fear of man, and the sectarian prejudices of belonging to a people, whom they have been long taught to consider as the chosen and peculiar people, may often come in for a share in the determination—while the real motives for action often lie disguised for want of a close and frequent examination, and many attempts are made to dignify them by names, which a close inspection will not warrant. An indolence, that never examines, but takes every thing upon trust, may be called prudent caution, and some may wrap themselves up in a cloak of self-sufficiency, remaining at ease in their possessions, while they indulge themselves in the confidence, that all must be well with them, because they keep in what they call *the good old way*, and are supported by all the strength, that can be received by having numbers on their side.

This to be sure is a path of ease, when it is compared with the opposite path, in which every thing is to be closely examined, and in which, for the sake of possessing substantial peace, some have believed it to be their duty to walk, and thus to separate from many of their former companions, and to pass along in a state of comparative solitude. I have endeavoured to trace out some causes, which have obstructed the progress of reform in some minds; but there are many other causes, which operate in different minds to retard this work. Deeply rooted prejudices are not easily removed; and many of

of the passions stand strongly opposed to their eradication. I have shewn that timidity operates in many instances: in others, conscience makes cowards of many. The worldling, the lukewarm, and the libertine, fly for shelter to a profession; and wish to atone for deficiencies of conduct by implicit belief. To such, serious inquiry into the discoveries of what is truth, is not adapted. It does not answer their purpose. They want a soft cushion to repose themselves on; and this they find in the various systems of belief, which are ready settled for them. To these they trust, and go on securely in their plans of gain, and of pleasure, and it seems altogether impossible to awaken such from their dreams.

Prudent caution, remote from rashness, is necessary to be attended to, in the cause of reform. It is essential to its progress; for some timid minds may be frightened from the path of reform, by the injudicious rashness of some of its advocates. Yet it is not a sufficient cause to reject reform, because some have attempted it with a rash zeal. Like every other thing, it may be abused; but this should be no reason against a steady, prudent perseverance in it. I apprehend many have been deterred from the path of reform, by the dread of going too far, and have thus sheltered under plausible reasonings, and kept themselves from the discharge of the duty of free and serious enquiry.

These remarks may appear a digression from the subject I principally design to treat of, but I think they may not be an unsuitable introduction to it.

I now proceed to attempt to point out the injurious consequences, that have arisen from the too free use of figurative language, and the many erroneous opinions, which have followed from it; I have farther to premise this general remark, that I hope to speak with becoming diffidence, and to bear in mind the frailty of human nature. I have no desire to impose my opinions on others, or that any should adopt them without careful examination. Eve-

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ry one has a right to propose his sentiments with becoming modesty, and yet with a steady firmness; I claim this liberty for myself, and leave my sentiments to make way in the minds of my readers, as each may find them deserving of attention.

ON THE ABSURDITY OF ERRONEOUS IDEAS,

ARISING FROM THE ABUSE OF

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, RESPECTING GOD.

There is a God!—all nature proclaims it, and man cannot but bear testimony to it, when he attentively considers the operations of his own mind—because God speaks in the hearts of all by his grace and good spirit, illuminating the understanding, and raising up the testimony of a pure conscience; so that indeed God is near to every one of us, and by the convictions of his spirit shews us the difference between good and evil. Thus, whether man looks outward to every thing around him, or turns his attention in upon himself, he may find abundant proof of the existence of a God—so far is clear, beyond all manner of doubt; but man has bewildered himself in attempting to speculate on the divine nature. I think it more safe to follow the example of an ancient Greek Philosopher, who, on being asked, what was the nature of God, desired some time to consider of it; he again requested longer time, and at length acknowledged, that the longer he studied it, the more it appeared impossible for him to find it out. I think that we ought to be satisfied with a firm belief of the existence of a God, the first cause, and the upholder of all things, without a vain attempt on our part to define what is, after all, beyond our comprehension.

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The Hebrew scriptures, by their highly figurative language, on this subject, have proved a fruitful source of errors. God is in many parts of them represented as acting under the influence of human passions—he is said to be jealous, to hate, to be angry, and to command man to shed his brother's blood. I will admit, that this manner of speaking of him, may in some degree have arisen from the imperfection of language, and man applying finite ideas to a being of infinity and perfection; but though candour may permit to make this concession to a certain point, yet I cannot bring myself to believe, but that many of the scripture writers entertained too low and gross ideas of the nature of God; and from the implicit adoption of their writings in this instance, as well as in others, many mistaken opinions arose. They often represented him under similes drawn from the kingly office; and with this figure they readily connected the ideas of pomp, arbitrary power, and parade, and supposed that he was to be approached with slavish fear, and adulation, and to be appeased with gifts, sacrifices, and costly shews. Hence arose many of the practices considered among the Jews as religious observances, which Christians of every sect, with some variations from the original model, and one from another, have too servilely, and without discrimination, adopted. The Christian borrowed from the Jews, and each of the successive sets of reformers retained a considerable portion of the old ceremonies, and the ancient ideas they had borrowed.

The Jews had sacrifices and shews, and a temple, in which they seemed to suppose that the divine power in some manner resided. They had an order of men under the title of a priesthood, whose business it was to attend to these things, excluding the interference of the people in what they called their holy things. The professing christians have their shews, their sacred houses and their priests; differing a little in name, but the same in effect. They attached ideas of superior sanctity

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to the houses appropriated for the public assembling together, and called the offices performed there, the public worship of God; as if God could be worshipped by such acts of exterior form.

I have often seriously revolved, in my mind, this subject of what is called public worship. I think the proper business of publicly assembling together, has been too little understood. I consider it as only relating to the ends of public instruction, and mutual edification; and if associations of this kind were conducted on right principles, man might be useful one to another; and, considering our state of weakness, mutual benefit might be received from thus assembling together; but for the ends of mutual edification, there appears no need of a set of hired teachers like the Jewish priesthood; nor can I think the act of assembling together, merely considered as an outward act, is the worship of God. Jesus Christ informed the woman, with whom he conversed, at Jacob's well, that neither at Jerusalem nor at the mountain of Samaria, was the Father to be worshipped, but that they who worship him aright, must worship him in spirit and in truth. I conceive this to mean the dedication of the heart, not the language of the lip. God requires from us obedience to his laws, not the parade of an outward assembling together under the name of performing acceptable worship to him.

Meeting together in a serious manner for the purpose of mutually receiving and communicating instruction, may be helpful to man, but ought not in my estimation to be considered as an act of worship towards God. What has passed current in the world as the worship of God?—It bears the appearance of attempting to recommend ourselves to the acceptance of God, by such acts as it may be supposed would conciliate the favour of an earthly prince; and this is one of the effects arising from a too free use of

figurative language, and adapting our conduct to the mistaken ideas, that originate from this source. The princes of this world like pomp, and shew, and to be approached with servility. The idea of king has been interwoven with our notions respecting the nature of God—and hence arises the pomp of what is called his worship.

I have in some of my former writings expressed my thoughts respecting music, that it is a luxurious gratification, in a general practical view injurious to the human mind: but of all species of it, I consider that part which is applied to what is called the worship of God, the most objectionable. The attempt to offer it as worship in hymns, and psalms, either vocally or by the instrumentality of an organ, in my apprehension, carries very much the appearance of absurdity; as if God could be pleased by such means—I express myself in strong terms, but I hope not uncharitably—I wish to speak of things plainly, as I conceive they really are; but far be the thought from my heart, to suppose but that many are in the practice of those things with much innocency and integrity of heart—they have not examined into the grounds of various customs, in which they are entangled, and they follow on in the accustomed track.

I would offer this farther apology for the plainness of speech, which I use on this occasion, that it appears to me right to point out the error, or supposed error, of any practice in strong terms to induce to an examination of it, and yet at the same time I think it my duty to make reasonable and tender allowance for those who may be in the practice of those things, which we condemn. It may be right boldly to point out the offence, and yet to exercise all charity towards those, who may be in the practice of those things which we condemn.

We may now consider this practice of introducing music and singing in another point of view, as it relates to the proper purpose

pose of assembling together for the sake of instruction; and here I think it has an injurious tendency; it may raise the animal spirits, and this we may call the fervor of devotion—it has a tendency to amuse, but I think it is detrimental to purposes of real improvement. It may to a very considerable degree nourish enthusiasm and superstition; but I think it does not tend to promote serious reflection and a profitable communing with ourselves.—I know that many have supposed they have received benefit in such practices. The sincerity of the heart is owned in every state; but it is an error to conclude that every act in which we are engaged, even with pure intentions, is consequently an act right in itself.—It is necessary in all things to go below the surface, as otherwise we shall be likely only to form a superficial judgment.

While the practice of singing psalms or hymns in public assemblies is the subject of consideration, it may not be useless to trace the origin of this practice. David practised it; but I do not see the advantage of blending christianity with the customs of the Jews. David danced also before the ark*—the imitation of this practice has been wisely omitted by most sects in latter times; yet a few enthusiasts plead scripture as their authority for their extravagant dancing or jumping; as the Shakers in America, and the Jumpers, a class of Methodists in Wales; so easy is it to find precedent in ancient times for the greatest extravagancies. Figurative language has contributed its share to encourage this practice.—The highly figurative and mystical language of the book of revelations countenances the practice. It is proper to observe that many in different ages have doubted the authenticity of this book, and supposed that John was not the author of it.—Let this be as it may, I think the interest of true religion does not suffer by doubts being entertained of the authenticity of this part of scripture. Its style is incomprehensible,

* David, by the abuse of a strong figure, is said to have been a man after God's own heart. I think many instances in his life, and to mention only one, his dying charge to Solomon to be revenged on Shemei, make strongly against the validity of this assertion.

comprehensible, and the attempt to explain its strong figures, or allegories, and to accommodate them to the passing events of successive generations has mostly ended in fostering the growth of fanaticism and extravagance.

In the manner in which this book treats of the nature of God, and from the appearance of pomp and splendour which it assigns to him, great encouragement is given to forming gross and unworthy ideas of him who is incomprehensible to the view and conjectures of finite mortals. I think it is better to confess our incapacity of forming adequate ideas of a great first cause, by whom all things are created and upheld, than to attempt to explain our ideas of his nature, by arraying him with the pomp and splendour of an earthly prince sitting upon a throne, and surrounded by a retinue of attendants of different gradations. If this representation be considered as a strong figure, it may not be hurtful, only there is need of caution; and I think it is better to speak in terms less liable to be misunderstood, as there is so much danger of figurative language being abused, and what was meant to be taken figuratively, being construed literally.

But if it be required to take this account as a real representation, my mind revolts at the idea of forming a likeness of God described in characters so derogatory to the sublime ideas, which ought to accompany the contemplation of such a subject. What awful, reverent humility should possess the mind of man, in looking towards him, and if a due sense of this necessary humility accompanied his mind, man would be restrained from forming conjectures on a subject, which lies beyond his scanty means of knowledge.

It may seem to digress, to make in this place a remark on another instance of the abuse of figurative language, which, however, I think, is intimately connected with the preceding subject, and arises from it. I am firmly impressed with a strong conviction of the immortality of the soul. I believe it,

it, because I think it is written in legible characters, on the human heart, and because the circumstances of our present state of existence bear testimony to it; but I do not receive the figurative account in which a future state is represented in some parts of scripture.

I regret that mankind, in too general a way, are in such a state, debased by their vices, and enfeebled by superstition, that they seem scarcely capable of examining into these matters with safety to themselves. The ties of religion are so loose on them, that if they slacken in the popular creed, and relax in the feeble obligations derived from this slender sanction, they seem ready in some instances to abandon themselves to the full career of their passions. By this means, the cause of free enquiry has been brought into disrepute. I do not wish to be instrumental in the smallest degree to relax the most strict obligations of morality, another name for genuine religion, which Christ defined to consist in the love of God, and in the love of our neighbour. If we really felt the love of God in our hearts, we would be just, merciful and humble; and discharge all our relative and social duties towards our brethren of mankind of every degree, with the most scrupulous attention; having, for our leading principle, the sense of duty arising from our love to God, and the precepts of his divine law, inwardly discovered in the hearts of all men.

I wish to see the people truly religious; but not that they should be under the influence of superstition, or of notions derogatory to the pure doctrines of unadulterated piety—that they should not have only the exterior trappings, and shew of virtue, but that they should really be possessed of this principle which would invigorate them to follow purity of life and manners.

I expect many misinterpret the tendency of my writings. I endeavour to point out the dangers of trusting in a form, and paying

paying implicit reverence to a book, in which, in my apprehension, truth and error are blended together. But it is far from my intention in doing so, to lessen the obligation to virtuous conduct. While people believe only traditionally, it appears immaterial what it is they believe, and while their speculations respecting religion terminate only in talk, and practice is neglected, their profession of faith is vain. I think I cannot unsettle those who are not on any sure foundation, because they now have nothing to lose, and I do not see that I do any injury in taking from them their insecure fancies. I recommend an earnest attention to strict propriety of conduct, as the first step towards engaging in any enquiry, which will be really profitable in the result. If others speculate rashly to their own loss, on themselves the blame must lie. I think the tendency of my writings is not to encourage unprofitable speculation, but it is necessary in my opinion to attempt to remove some errors out of the way, which have kept many from having a true sight of their state. If I see my neighbour trusting in an unsubstantial form, and depending on opinion, as a substitute for practice, I think I am doing him a kindness, and contributing my endeavours to promote his, as well as the general good, by taking on me, the unwelcome task of freely warning him of his mistake. So that instead of wounding the best interests of religion, as some suppose I am doing, I trust my writings have in reality a different tendency, when they are viewed on a more extensive scale, than that which the narrow bigotry of sects brings forward—at least, such is my intention, and I hope I am not mistaken in the means.

There is another society, who have, I think, with much propriety, discarded the pomp attached to public worship. The people called Quakers did well in their beginning in going so far as they did in this respect; but, like all preceding reformers, they stopped short—and many of their successors failed greatly

greatly in coming up to the plan on which their forefathers set out. Thus they have dwindled into much formality. The simplicity of their appearance in this, as well as in other respects, has been specious; but I fear when it comes to be closely examined into, there will be something found to be wanting. They laid aside their exterior pomp and trappings, but I fear that in a certain degree they retained the spirit, which produced these things.

The age in which the Quakers first appeared, was an age of gloomy superstition. I think they retained too much of it; and having once adopted it, a disposition to adhere tenaciously to all their ancient establishments, and to oppose all tendency to reformation, has perpetuated their ancient customs, and produced a disinclination impartially to examine into the origin of them. Thus they still retained the idea that worship was paid to God, more especially at the times of publicly assembling together: they called their assemblies, meetings of worship, and seemed to suppose that a peculiar sanctity, and a more holy frame of mind ought to prevail on such occasions.

I have already expressed the idea, that in my opinion, the worship in spirit and in truth consists in the attention of the mind of man to the discoveries of the grace of God manifested there, and in a constant struggle and earnest endeavour, to have our conduct regulated by its dictates: by this means the universal Father may with equal acceptance be worshipped at all times, in the daily transactions of our life, in our various communications with the world, in the discharge of our domestic and social duties, as well as in the hour of silent retirement, or in the midst of the congregation.

Religion, viewed in this manner, is found not to consist in the exterior act, but in an inward attention to the internal principle of truth, and of justice in the heart; and the publicly assembling together is only useful so far as it affords a means

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of our being helpful to one another by mutual instruction. But I think the uses of association for religious purposes have been greatly abused among all societies: they have been too much considered as an end, instead of being viewed as a means leading to that end; for I think they can be no further useful, than as they have a tendency to lead the mind to the practice of piety and virtue, and they are hurtful when they are too much relied upon, and attempts made to substitute them for the proper discharge of our various duties. These remarks equally apply to those associations conducted with pompous activity, as well as to those meetings which may be held in formal silence.

Actuated by these motives, I have for upwards of two years declined the attendance of public assemblies; because I think the purposes of them have been perverted: yet when we consider the weakness and frailty incident to our present state, it seems desirable to have the mutual aid and assistance which I am ready to think associations conducted on sound principles might produce; and I would rejoice in seeing any plan brought forward that would be likely to produce the advantages of public association, without the disadvantages and injurious tendencies which have hitherto attended it.

I have frequently viewed this subject with some solicitude, but I have as yet seen no way of obtaining its advantages, without encountering many disadvantages. Perhaps a time may come, when the old ideas and prejudices attached to this subject may be done away; and then a prospect may open of an association on liberal and enlightened principles, wherein neither the narrow views of bigotted sectarianism, nor the maxims of superstition, will be allowed to have any place.

I have dwelt the longer on this subject, because I have thought it is intimately connected with the purport of this chapter, that we may have proper ideas of the nature of the Great Supreme, and see clearly the disadvantage of forming our ideas

ideas on the popular notions arising from the abuse of figurative language. I have endeavoured to express myself in language as clearly as I well could To those who have thought closely and seriously on this subject, or to those who may be willing to do so, I expect my language will be intelligible. The declaration of the holy Jesus is applicable on this occasion.

"The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in the mountain of Samaria, nor yet at Jerusalem worship the Father; the true worshippers shall worship him in spirit and in truth, for he seeketh such to worship him: God is a spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth."—See John, iv. chap.

ON THE
ALLEGORICAL DOCTRINES
OF THE
FALL OF MAN—AND OF ORIGINAL SIN.

THESE doctrines have, in my apprehension, been a fruitful source of error; the abuse of figurative language has been one cause, though there are also other causes, which I shall presently proceed to point out. The most dangerous consequence resulting from this doctrine, as it is generally explained, is the countenance which it gives to man to shift the blame of his wrong conduct from himself, and to place it to the account of his supposed remote ancestors, Adam and Eve. This idea, I fear, often settles poor man at ease in his wrong conduct, and has a tendency to weaken the struggles in his mind against the influence of his passions, when they happen to take a wrong direction, as they always do when they are not kept in their proper places. The giving way to wrong dispositions, is *the fall* which every man experiences in his own indi-

vidual capacity:—he falls, because he transgresses the divine law discovered in his heart, and is consequently accountable for this want of obedience. He does not fall, because Adam and Eve disobeyed, but because he himself disobeys, and neglects to join in with the operation of grace in his heart. Thus responsibility attaches more closely to him, and the self-complacent doctrine, which often reconciles man to himself by throwing the blame upon others, is removed, with all its train of evil consequences.

I admit the fall of man when this term is properly defined. I think it is a consequence of his own transgression; but I reject the figurative account of it, not merely because I cannot comprehend it, but because I think it is a doctrine which has an injurious practical effect upon many who adopt it. That it has not an injurious effect upon all who embrace it, is not owing to the truth of the doctrine; but we find that in this case, as well as respecting other erroneous doctrines, the sincerity of the heart, and other favourable circumstances frequently operate to the prevention of speculative opinions doing as much injury, or influencing the conduct to so great a degree as we might suppose to take place, from a theoretical examination of the doctrines. This we may see exemplified every day. Man frequently acts better than from his opinions or system we have reason to expect, and from this circumstance we may learn to have becoming charity for one another's speculative errors.

It is desirable to have right sentiments, and to a certain degree it may have a tendency to produce right conduct; but I feel no hesitation in saying, that I prefer right conduct with erroneous sentiment, to the finest set of opinions where there is not an earnest endeavour especially to attend to propriety of conduct. What doctrine can be more dangerous than to suppose that we must of necessity do wrong, because Adam sinned? This is to shift the blame in great measure off ourselves, and

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the evil is further encreased by coupling with it the remaining part of the doctrine, that the righteousness of another has removed this load of guilt. If we know our own state we must allow that our knowledge in most things, and also our obedience to what we know to be our duty, are very imperfect. This appears beyond doubt to be the law of our nature in our present stage of existence—why it is so, we cannot tell, for the clearing up of this and many other seeming difficulties, we must wait until they shall be explained to us in another state of being, to which, as heirs of immortality, we look forward as our inheritance.

" 'Tis immortality—'tis that alone,
" Amidst life's pains, debasements, emptiness,
" The soul can comfort, elevate, and fill."

YOUNG.

" Hope humbly then, with trembling pinions soar,
" Wait the great teacher, death—and God adore."

POPE.

In the mean time the allegorical account of the fall of man by no means satisfies me, or carries to my mind the evidence of being a rationally consistent account. It is so far from removing difficulties, that in my view it is attended with insurmountable obstacles, and is the fruitful parent of dangerous errors. I do not desire to disguise difficulties, and am therefore ready to acknowledge, that I cannot comprehend, with full satisfaction, our proneness to evil, which, however, the best of men feel. I have no doubt that this and every other circumstance relating to our present and future state are all ordered in the unerring counsels of divine wisdom. That we are placed here as probationers, with the liberty of choice between good and evil, and that there is a constant struggle or conflict between vice and virtue, is all that appears given us to know with full certainty. Further knowledge is reserved for a future state, when, I assuredly believe, every difficulty will be cleared up. It does not become

become us, in our present state, to attempt to pry too curiously into those matters. Obedience and attention to the discoveries of our necessary duties are the proper business of man, and of these the knowledge is not withheld from us.

Respecting difficult points beyond our present knowledge; it is better to confess our ignorance, than to adopt vague and figurative explanations, and attempt to dignify them by the name of knowledge: for by so doing, we fall into many errors. The busy mind of man is ready to intermeddle in things which it cannot comprehend after all its searching. The adherents to old systems are often very clamorous in accusing those who reject their systems, and view them as speculative fancies, with indulging themselves in unprofitable curiosity. They continue the metaphor from the story of Adam and Eve, and charge them with eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. On an impartial inspection, I think it will be found that the advocates for old systems and metaphorical allusions, for which they claim entire reverence and reception, are the persons who are most justly chargeable with attempting to pry into things beyond our comprehension. They boldly assert that they know. We more than doubt their knowledge, but content ourselves with humbly acknowledging our ignorance respecting them. Who then are the curious and dogmatical speculators? I think the asserters of those things, without proof, are the blameworthy persons in those instances—the others only exercise a profitable hesitation not to believe without evidence, and confess their inability to judge with sufficient correctness on those points. But poor frail man who can see but a little way before him, and on many of those subjects can exercise but a short-sighted and imperfect vision, rashly and boldly judges and anathematizes his brother, because he cannot join with him in his apprehensions respecting those things. Purblind himself, he condemns his neighbour for not seeing as he does. What lamentable effects arise from the bigotry and intolerance of many of the support-

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ers of ancient systems! The supporters of these systems appeal for authority to a book, which it evidently appears was written by the various authors with very different views. I apprehend the very best of the writers were men liable to err like ourselves, and therefore I cannot admit their evidence as indisputable authority, but reading the Bible as we would do any other book, I think we have a right to examine closely into the nature of its contents.

This account of the fall of man appears to be given as an historical record; but whether it be taken as such, or be looked on as an allegorical or figurative attempt to account for the origin of evil in the human mind, is, I think, not a point of much moment. Taken in either sense, it does not, in my apprehension, remove the difficulties attendant on this subject, nor would it be considered to do so, if it were found in any other book than the Bible; and I cannot but consider it as an error, to insist, that every thing found in that book should be admitted as indisputable truth, however inconsistent in itself the account may be, or however it may be disguised by metaphor or figure.

The weakness of our comprehension to judge, is by many made use of as an argument to persuade us to take relations of various things upon trust. It is safe not to be hasty in forming a judgment, but this prudent caution is equally necessary to be attended to by those who assert the authenticity of such accounts, as by those who doubt concerning them. A salutary distrust of this kind might help to temper the fierce zeal of many of the sticklers for what is popularly considered as orthodoxy. Man is unable to account for many things, but I do not see any reason why, on this account, he should be called upon to believe implicitly; and yet this has often been alleged as a reason for his doing so. It would be unwise to believe every account, only because we cannot prove the contrary by demonstration. The short-sightedness of human intellect often prevents us from accomplishing this point. I do not believe in the

the existence of evil spirits, demons, and a long list of phantoms, which in former times disturbed the imaginations of many. It would be difficult, and perhaps impossible for us, with our present very limited powers of comprehension, to disprove, by reasoning, the reality of such notions; but we find that as mankind have advanced in intelligence and information, they have discarded these things as silly fancies, and the result of ignorance. When such notions were more prevalent, many accounts were brought forward of their reality. Now when some on rational motives discredit such stories, and others are rather ashamed publicly to avow their secret belief in them; they seem almost entirely to have disappeared. I intend in another place to speak of these supposed supernatural appearances; in this place I only bring them forward to shew the impropriety of requiring us to believe every thing, which, owing to our limited powers, we may be unable to adduce evidence to disprove.

I think it may not be without its use to examine into the rise of this doctrine of original sin, as it is now held. I do not find that it was a subject much spoken of, till about the beginning of the fifth century of the christian æra, when, in a controversy about baptism, whether it should be administered to children or grown up persons, Austin or Augustine brought it forward as an argument in favour of infant baptism, which it was urged was necessary to wash away the stain or taint received from Adam. By those who reject the rite of baptism altogether, this cannot be considered as a valid argument. Though differing in many points from the people called Quakers, with whom I was formerly in connection, I cordially unite with them in the rejection of this ceremony.

A doctrine may in a certain sense be well supposed to receive a tinge from the first author or promulgator of it, at least it may often afford a clue to unravel his motives for the propagation of a favourite opinion; and in this point of view the character of Austin is of some consequence in considering the doctrine.

Austin

Austin had been of profligate manners in his youth: he and his son, the offspring of an unlawful connection, were baptised together—Austin had then attained to middle age; he afterwards became a warm controversialist, having written two hundred and thirty-two separate books or treatises on controversial subjects; he was besides, a fierce persecutor of those who differed from him in opinion. Thus, if he forsook in his more advanced years the crimes of his youth, he appears to have only changed the vices of one time of life, for the equally noxious ones of his advancing years; proving by his conduct, that he, like many others, had only exchanged the vices of youth for the no less hurtful vices often attendant on more advanced years; and "This was the man (says Robert Robinson, late of Cambridge) who invented the doctrines of original sin, and of baptism to wipe it away."

It appears to me by no means surprising that a man of his character should flee for refuge from the stings of conscience, and shelter himself under a doctrine that appeared to remove the weight of the responsibility off himself, and throw the blame on Adam, while, at the same time, he provided a cheap remedy by the rite of baptism, and the doctrine of the atonement. As was the man, so was the doctrine; a doctrine which in every successive age has had the tendency to set the believers in it at rest in their wrong conduct, and to prevent the earnest struggle to overcome the evil dispositions by individual exertion.

ON THE
DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT,
AND ON
THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST.

THE doctrine of the atonement may be considered as the counterpart of the doctrine of original sin. In the one case guilt

guilt was supposed to have been incurred, before we had done any thing personally to make us partakers in it—a guilt which attached to us, from the moment of our birth, in consequence of the offence of a first parent or head of the human race: this may be called external guilt, and if this could attach to us, it then readily followed that this guilt might be removed by another act independent of us—here we have a guilt by substitution, and a righteousness by substitution; each tending to remove the responsibility of actual individual guilt from man, and I think we may with equal clearness trace both errors to the same source—the abuse of figurative language.

I have already acknowledged the proneness of the human mind to join with the wrong, and yet I cannot bring myself to think that the figurative account of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, through the temptation of *a serpent*, satisfactorily accounts for it; so in this case I think frail man stands in need of a saving power to preserve him from evil, and I cannot think that this redemption is to be witnessed through the merits of an outward saviour, but only through the immediate and ordinary operations of the grace of God, assisting us to choose the good and refuse the evil.—This grace or good spirit of God is always ready to assist our weakness. Let man strive against his evil passions, and he will feel a strength to resist and overcome them. The evil arises in the heart of man individually, and the remedy is to be found there also. In vain does man bewilder himself in the speculations of his inheriting original sin, and of a redemption and atonement through outward means and the merits of another: all these speculations lead him from the one thing needful, a close attention to what passes in his own mind: for there is the scene of temptation, and there is the scene of victory. Man looks out for that which only is to be found within. God by his good spirit is graciously pleased to assist us to perform our several duties; and the manifestations of his will are discovered

through

through the intimations of a pure enlightened conscience, and the dictates of sound reason. This I call an internal revelation made in the minds of all.—Man is liable to mistake its dictates through want of attention, as well as from various other causes; but it is his business to discriminate between its genuine dictates, and the language of his passions, and of his prejudices. It is the business and the duty of man to separate between truth and error, and the exercise of this faculty, divinely bestowed upon man, strengthens the mind, and causes it to be skilful in the discrimination of good from evil. This engagement of mind necessarily requires earnestness and close attention; but the lessons that are learned in this manner, are far more to be depended on, than what can be gained from any other source; because this knowledge is practical, all other acquired by the teachings of man, or by reading a book, and calling it a revelation, can only be speculative.

It may appear that in the essential part of the doctrine of human frailty, and the necessity of experiencing a power to save, my ideas agree with those of many others—the essential difference between us lies here: they attempt to explain those points by allegories, and figurative accounts drawn from scripture, which, in my view, do not afford any clear solution of the difficulties attendant on those subjects; I hesitate to admit their reasonings, confess my ignorance, and admit only the simple facts that may be clearly deduced from experience; by so doing, I escape some errors that are closely interwoven with the figurative explanation, while I at the same time admit the plain doctrine of man's weakness, and the necessity of divine help to assist him in subduing his passions, and bringing his propensities within their proper bounds.

I think it may tend to a clearer explanation of the subject we are now considering, to state some remarks on the

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authority of scripture. The advocates for its entire reception, as believing it to be throughout the dictates of inspiration, get rid of some of their difficulties, by appealing to its sanction; however, they often only exchange one difficulty for another by so doing, if they follow on to further examination. All sects, as well as almost every individual, claim to have a key peculiarly their own for its genuine interpretation: by this means much controversy has arisen between the contending parties; some explained in one way, and some in another; each zealous for his own interpretation, supported it often with warmth, and attacked others, who as zealously supported their ideas. Some took it literally, others forced it to bend to their favourite plan, by attempting to allegorize it. It has been a very uncertain rule in the hands of its advocates, for endeavours have been used to support the most contradictory sentiments from its contents often with almost equal plausibilty; and this is not at all to be wondered at, when we consider that it contains many contradictory assertions, and doctrines and commands the most opposite to each other—so that instead of finding certainty, and getting rid of strife, by an appeal to it, the Bible for many centuries has been the groundwork of the strifes and contentions which have agitated that part of the world calling itself christian. The application of this term of christian is in my view improper—it may have been christian in profession, but a profession does not rightly entitle to the denomination.

It may be seen how little the profession of the christian religion has done for those who have assumed its name. This, however, by no means derogates from the value of the pure doctrines taught by Jesus Christ—it only proves the inutility of a bare profession. Besides the long catalogue of vices practised by individuals, persecution and war, the dreadful scourges of our evil passions, have been sanctioned by the united concurrence of most sects. Here then let me ask, what has the *profession* of christianity done towards amending the tempers, and

and reforming the lives of those who have assumed the name of christians? I see christianity professed, but not practised. Many of the strongest advocates for creeds and systems, by courtesy denominated christian, have been strenuous advocates for war—a practice, in my opinion, whether conducted on defensive, or offensive principles, entirely inconsistent with the precepts of Christ, enjoining the patient bearing of injuries, and the forgiveness of enemies. Where have we seen more clamorous supporters of war, than among the body of the priesthood of the different denominations?—the assumed teachers of the people, and the professed followers of the God of peace! May we not justly say, in reviewing the black list of crimes perpetrated under the sanction of professed christians, by men of the foremost rank, and in the estimation of the superficially judging multitude, of supposed sanctity of manners. "O Religion, what crimes have not been committed in thy name!" When I perceived such palpable errors glossed over, and maintained by persons of high authority, I was led to examine into the creeds or systems which supported such errors in practice. I found other errors in their systems, and I lost all confidence in their authority. I said there are many errors in their practice. It is right to try their creeds. The more I examined, I detected further errors. The process, in my mind, has been gradual, and I trust I have not taken up my objections to the existing systems in a spirit of self-confidence hastily, or on superficial grounds. I saw many errors propagated under the sanction of what passed for religion. I paused, I examined, and at length it resulted in a conviction, that those systems could not be founded right which supported such errors. I looked around for something more pure, and in the earnest and sincere pursuit after truth, I have separated from all societies. I love real genuine religion, and most earnestly struggle to be obedient to what I conceive to be its dictates. I submit with resignation to the reproach which men may chuse to throw on me by giving the name of deist, infidel, or whatever other nick-

name

name may suit their fancy. I am supported by an inward consciousness of endeavouring to seek seriously after truth, and I think I have often found it to lie in opposition to many commonly received opinions. It certainly is in opposition to many of their practices.—Such is the ground of my conviction.

Pure, unmixed christianity, the holy religion taught by Jesus Christ, is essentially different from that which is generally practised under the name. I think the general error lies in too readily yielding assent without examination; in believing too much and practising too little. Some endeavour to eke out deficiency of good conduct, by an extension of an unascertained belief, without examining into the nature or quality of it. A christian is not he who gives a cold assent to certain doctrines, but a christian in deed and in truth, endeavours to put in practice the precepts, and to follow in life and conduct the holy example of Christ. It would tend to promote right ideas, if the term christianity were separated from belief, and applied only to right practice. Then a nation or a man would not be accounted christian, because they merely believed—he only would be entitled to the high distinction, who followed after propriety of conduct. I fear if many of the controversialists that have appeared in support of doctrines in various ages, were tried by this rule, they would be found wanting.

It has been frequently asserted by the advocates for the reception of the scriptures throughout, as a revelation of the will of God, that without them, mankind would be perplexed with endless uncertainties, which could never be solved without their aid. But does the admission of those writings in the bulk, enable us to get out of these difficulties, or has it a tendency to put an end to controversies? Many violent disputes have arisen from opposite interpretations of scripture on doctrinal points. The pages of ecclesiastical history are almost entirely filled with accounts of those disputes. I think there could not have been

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more furious altercations and unchristian bickerings, if the book had never been set up as the infallible standard of revelation; so that for my part I see no advantage arising from making it a rule by which to try all controversies. I admit that many parts of it are deserving of the highest authority, but I cannot receive the mixed volume from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelations, with confidence in its genuineness or authenticity, as being of divine original. I see no other way of allaying controversies, but for all to endeavour to cherish christian dispositions, and under their influence, to seek out truth: then strifes would cease, and man would know as much as is necessary for him in his present state;—but until a genuine christian temper prevails, controversies will arise, whether we admit or reject the authority of the book. To be in reality christians, rather than to struggle only to appear to be such, is the point highly necessary to be sought after, but which has been too much neglected.

I suppose little is known with certainty about the manner of collecting that part of the scriptures called the Old Testament; they are properly Jewish records, nor, I suppose, is it known with what kind of accuracy they were kept. They contain so many inconsistencies, intermixed, however, with some excellent and truly sublime doctrines, that many are willing to give up the claim of plenary inspiration, as far as relates to them, who yet claim it in a much higher degree for the part called the New Testament. Yet still many difficulties attend these latter writings. Jesus Christ left no written memorials behind him. It is doubtful when or by whom the accounts published of him were written. I suppose the most careful enquirers have been able to find no genuine copies of an earlier date, than about the middle of the second century. If they were written by the persons whose names they bear, yet many interpolations and additions may have been made in the interval, especially when we consider the character even of that early

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ly period of the church, wherein an apostacy from the genuine characteristics of christianity were but too apparent; for they appeared then, to have made attempts to substitute legendary tales for the truth of the gospel—indeed these ages present a thick gloom, through which it is impossible to penetrate.

It was easy, in this dark age, to put into the manuscripts additions, and in some cases to take from the genuine account, so as greatly to disfigure it. There are evident contradictions in the history of the four Evangelists, which all the art or ingenuity of harmonists have not been able to reconcile. It seems impossible for us to find out, with any certainty, how these things happened, nor does our inability to do so appear at all an essential loss to us. From a review of those matters conducted in a cautious and serious manner, it appears that we ought not to place an entire confidence in those writings, in the state in which they have reached us, but that each part of them must depend on its own intrinsic evidence and real worth, to command the rational assent of the readers. This is treating the scriptures as we would do any other book, and I am of the judgment, is the manner in which they should be treated: then such parts of them will stand, as fully recommend themselves to the rational conviction of the reader, as I think many of them clearly do; while other parts of them, will, with propriety, be held in less estimation.

Many, however, are afraid that if they give up the standard of scripture, they would be involved in uncertainties and perplexities. I have endeavoured to shew that by an adherence to scripture, these difficulties have not been obviated; but that opposite interpretations have supplied a great fund of controversy, in the management of which every one has in reality judged for himself. He put his own construction on the different parts of it, and in reality constituted himself the judge of its meaning. What can any one do more, when he lays aside the book

book and judges for himself without it? He formed his own opinion before, he does so still. It is right that he should think with caution, and judge with the hesitation becoming a being whose powers in this state of existence have not arrived at maturity; but as every man is bound to find out truth, and if he do not discover it for himself, he must remain ignorant of it—he ought to be earnest in his search after it, and the difficulty of finding it out, or the danger of missing it in the search, are no sound arguments against his endeavours to do his best in the search. As reasonable would it be for a man always to sit still, and never seek for food to support animal life, for fear of meeting with poison instead of food, or of falling into some pit or snare while he was looking for it:—this would be indolence, but not virtue.

The mind of man is constituted on active principles, his search after knowledge is allowable, nay even it is his duty; and if he search with becoming earnestness and modest caution, he will gain instruction in the search:—the difficulties he meets with, will tend to his improvement, and his very disappointments will prove serviceable to him, because they will teach him increasing caution and humility. Under the influence of these dispositions, the serious enquirer after truth need not fear to follow on in the path of enquiry, even though he should find it to lead him to conclusions widely different from those adopted by the multitude.

Far be it from me to say the least to lessen the veneration for the most excellent and holy pattern ever shewn to man, as exemplified in the blameless and unspotted life of Jesus Christ. Although in the historical relations we have of him, in the writings of the Evangelists, there appear to me many obscurities and contradictions, and some accounts which I cannot receive with entire confidence; yet, notwithstanding, his character shines conspicuously beautiful, even through these clouds. He displayed a holy example of meekness, firmness, resignation

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to the divine will, and in fine, of every virtue. I cannot enter into the question in what manner he was allied to the divine nature; it would have been well, if the framers of the various systems respecting his nature, had foreborne to enter into curious disquisitions on this subject; for all their curious distinctions and subtleties have not set the matter in any clearer point of view, nor do I think any enquiries of this kind, can, in any degree approach to certainty: at best they are but ingenious guesses.

The mind of man, when its attention is directed to enquiries within its proper sphere of duty, may be profitably exercised, but enquiry becomes injurious, if it lead to a field of barren speculations and attempt to explain matters which lie beyond our present state of limited comprehension. But the ever-busy mind of man is unwilling to acknowledge its ignorance, and rather than do so, either forms conjectures for itself, or depends upon the equally unsupported conjectures of others.

From these causes, and also from the abuse of figurative language, mistakes have arisen. In many cases, we have no solid grounds to go on to ascertain what is truth, it is therefore more easy to determine what is not truth, and here we proceed on safer ground. To find out what is not truth, may often assist us to guard against error, while we are restrained by the finiteness of our present knowledge from ascertaining on points not essential for us to know, what is truth. Thus in the present case I think I have sufficient evidence in my mind to warrant me in rejecting the doctrine of the atonement through the merits of Christ; and yet I find no sufficient evidence to guide me in speculating concerning his nature. The rejection of the former, I think, preserves from falling into a practical error; respecting the latter, knowledge is not requisite, nor would it be likely to assist in the punctual and faithful discharge of our several duties.

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It contents me, therefore, to receive Christ as a pattern of purity, and a guide to follow after so far as I am able to trace his footsteps with clearness. It is our duty to endeavour to regulate our conduct by his precepts, against covetousness and other vices, and in favour of forgiveness of injuries, and the doing unto others according to the rules of the strictest justice, even though we should not fully receive the account of his turning water into wine at a marriage in Cana of Galilee,* and some other similar relations.

A loud cry of heresy will probably be renewed against me, for venturing to express a doubt on these subjects; but I feel without alarm on this head, being conscious of the sincerity of my motives, and knowing that I have no inclination to speak lightly of things really sacred. I think it right to enquire into ancient foundations freely, and I have not the smallest wish to induce others to follow me, unless a similar conviction attends their minds on a serious research.

My exposing myself to censure and reproach in thus venturing to express myself freely, may have its use in promoting among a few, a spirit of liberal enquiry, which may afterwards spread more extensively, to the removal of some popular errors, which have been long traditionally received. I cannot see the necessary essential connection between receiving the heavenly precepts of Christ, and endeavouring to make them the rule of our conduct, and the implicit belief of all the miracles, which are recorded to have been performed by him. Many of them I see no reason to disbelieve, because they are consistent with his character of infinite goodness; and I do not doubt, but it may have pleased

* If he actually performed this miracle, as it is recorded, it appears different from most others of the acts recorded of him. Healing the sick was an act of mercy and beneficence—the procuring an additional supply of wine at a marriage feast can only be considered as an exertion of his power, without an adequate end in view.

pleased God to endue him with infinite power also; but if others were to go further, and deny more of them,* I by no means think it would unchristian them, while an adherence to his precepts and doctrines was made the rule of their lives. I sincerely wish that mankind would more generally learn, that genuine christianity consists not in professions, but in deeds. If they acted practically on this principle, a great reformation would take place in the world. Let us always bear in mind this essential truth, that practice is superior to belief.

It is necessary carefully to unravel the plain, simple meaning from the labyrinth of figurative language. Christ was the especial messenger and the sent of God. He was the chosen instrument of publishing to the world a comprehensive system of morality, more pure than any that had ever before been taught. He came to free the Jews from the bondage of a ceremonial law, and mankind from the mental shackles of gross groveling superstition and idolatry. In this sense he may be called a Saviour; but this term has been so much abused, I hesitate to make free use of it without explanation: for I cannot bring myself to believe, that he brought salvation to mankind, by bearing their iniquities, by his death upon the cross.

In this very expression of "the cross of Christ," we may see the liability of figurative expressions being perverted to support gross ideas entirely contrary to the design of the speaker. Christ appears to have used the term of "taking up his cross," to denote living a life of virtuous self-denial; yet this figure has been grossly abused, and the interpretation limited to the cross, on which he was crucified. In the more dark ages, the wood of the true cross, as it was termed, was eagerly sought

* The story of the fruitless figtree appears strange, as we have it recorded, Matt. xxi, and Mark xi. I cannot receive it as it is now written. It may have been expressed by way of a strong figure, and the accuracy of the expression may by some means have been lost to us. As it is related, it is inconsistent with the character of Christ.

sought after, and esteemed a sacred relic, until it became an object of great imposture. Some bow to a crucifix, as if an outward representation could retain any virtue. Among sects boasting to be more enlightened, I fear the cross of Christ is frequently spoken of, and a reliance placed on his sufferings on it, by many, who are nevertheless practically unacquainted with the necessity and true nature of a life of self-denial.

Where the benefit of his example is known, it doubtless is of advantage, by shewing the most excellent example of every thing that is good. But figurative language has, in this case, in my apprehension, corrupted the genuine simplicity of the gospel. Mankind have, in all ages, been too prone to form to themselves a representation of God drawn from a resemblance to their own passions and dispositions. The general mistake has been to represent God as actuated by human passions and prejudices. Man has formed representations of God after his own image, and the same has been done respecting Christ. They have speculated respecting his nature, until they have entirely lost themselves in the confused perplexity of their ideas. For proof of this assertion, I appeal to the volumes of controversy, which have been written for and against the incomprehensible doctrine of the trinity. They often divided and subdivided, and quarrelled with one another, about the most trifling differences. How much better would it have been to have wisely refrained from such attempts, and honestly confessed their own ignorance! but human pride revolted at this idea, and the unprofitable contest has been continued through successive ages.

It may be clearly perceived that I reject the doctrine of the trinity in any of its forms. I cannot see the utility of entering into those questions which have so long agitated the world on the manner of the birth of Christ, or of his glorified state. I acknowledge my ignorance on these and many other speculations of a similar tendency, and believe that man can attain to

no certainty respecting them in his present state of existence. These and many things even relating to our present and future existence, will remain hid from the most prying search, while we are surrounded with the veil of mortality. But I venture to suggest, that many, by viewing these things too much through the medium of allegory and figurative language, have bewildered themselves, and formed gross and groveling ideas on those subjects; and that most have been too outward in their views and interpretations concerning them.

The Quakers kept themselves more free from being entangled in those disputes than any other society. They commendably applied themselves in general more to recommending practical duties, than the speculative studies of points of doctrine. Yet truth compels me to admit that their first appearance as a society, was in an age of superstition and fanaticism; and therefore it is no matter of wonder, that they should at their beginning have retained some of their former prejudices, from leaning to the prevailing manners of the age. It appears difficult to collect with precision from their writings, what were exactly their opinions on some points of doctrine. They expressed themselves so unaccurately, that frequently in the space of a few lines, or pages, they made declarations of opposite tendency. Thus it is easy to quote Penn against Penn, and even the more methodical Barclay may in many cases be quoted against himself. I do not see the advantage of appealing to them as standards of sound sentiment. I deny the propriety and advantages of an appeal to the ancient fathers of any church.

The Quakers have in former times denied the prescriptive authority, claimed for those, who have been called the ancient fathers of the christian church. In my separation from connection with their society, I also deny the prescriptive authority of the fathers of their church. The question in the present day

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is not, what were the opinions of Fox, Penn, Barclay, and Pennington; (men whose general character in most respects I highly revere) but rather let us enquire, what is truth, independent of the authority of ancient names.

They, whose names I have mentioned, were justly respected characters, and I am far from condemning them indiscriminately for the ambiguity of their expressions. The progress of their separation from commonly received opinions, may be well supposed to be gradual in many cases; and if they wavered in their sentiments at times, it was the necessary consequence of their being serious enquirers after truth, and of endeavouring to keep their minds open to further discoveries. They only who have rounded their system, and determined to shut out the admission of all further evidence, can, with consistency, be in the habit of speaking authoritatively.

As an instance of the narrow, gloomy notions generally entertained in the first rise of this people, I adduce one of the early queries in use among them, and which was answered from the smaller to the general meetings, but from a change of times it has long since become obsolete—"What signal judgments have fallen on persecutors?" There are many instances on their records of casualties, which happened to those who had persecuted them, being interpreted as signal instances of divine judgments. These accounts should be admitted with great caution, and man should be very careful of assuming the right of placing himself in the seat of judgment, and taking upon him presumptuously, to condemn those who differ from him. I think the conduct of the early members of society may admit of some palliative excuse, when we consider they were smarting under the lash of an unjust persecution, and their minds were frequently ruffled by the irritations of controversy—in this state they partook, in some degree, of the general intolerance of the times; yet in considering their general

ral character, such conduct ought to be set down, as a deduction in the estimate; and they should not be held up so indiscriminately as patterns worthy of imitation in all respects. With some, the practice of extolling their predecessors, arises from an honest desire to promote piety among their fellow members, by holding up for imitation their conduct, which certainly in many respects was praiseworthy; but we ought to consider that caution is necessary in giving indiscriminate praise, and it is a false shame that prevents us from acknowledging faults in those whom we love, as well as our own faults. Many, I fear, are influenced by more unworthy motives. Some gratify their vanity and self-complacency by extolling the founders of a sect to which they belong—others by implicitly reposing on the opinions and practices of their forefathers, think they preserve their reputation among men, while they indulge in that indolence and indifferency to religious enquiries, which is the effect of their largely partaking of the overwhelming commercial spirit of the times.

I have introduced, with no unkind intentions, the foregoing allusions to the society from which I have separated. Some of them may think differently, and complain of my bringing them and their doctrines so frequently into review in my writings. I do not bear to them either collectively, or individually, the smallest ill will or grudge; and I wish to avoid giving unnecessary offence, but I think they have no right to be dissatisfied with my giving them a friendly hint now and then as I pass along. I think some subjects which I wish to illustrate, may frequently be more clearly pointed out, by reference to particular societies, than if I had confined myself to general remarks; more especially, when I allude to doctrines and practices peculiar to them.

It appears to have been a general error to form allusions to the nature of God from ideas drawn from kingly power: Christ is also spoken of in similar terms drawn from figura-

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tive language, as a king's son. The next step was to incorporate him in the government, and then the doctrine of the trinity followed. Thus I think we may trace this doctrine, which has been productive of so many contests in various ages, to the abuse of figurative language.

The Quakers, by another mode, in which the ambiguity of figurative language, in my apprehension, has led into error, attempted to explain their ideas respecting Christ. They appeared not to have had clear ideas on this subject themselves, and therefore it is not to be wondered at, if they failed to communicate clear ideas to others, and hence the ambiguity so often conspicuous in their preaching. They used a figurative interpretation at some times, and at other times they explained themselves according to a literal sense, and not unfrequently they jumbled these two ideas together. I think this confusion of ideas and of expression may be thus accounted for.

They personified the divine influence operating on the heart of man, by the name of Christ, or Christ within, or Christ in man. This, if merely considered as a figure, may not have been injurious; for I am very ready to admit that this divine influence, let us call it by what name we may, was in a more abundant manner poured forth upon Christ; and as he possessed it in a superior degree, I see not much objection to call it his spirit—only a caution seems necessary, that in calling it by this name, it should be clearly explained that it is only called *his*, because he possessed it in a more eminent manner, to fit him for the divine mission on which he was sent by God, to bring life and immortality more clearly to light, by the doctrines which he taught, as well as by his holy example. But the term having been once adopted, mistakes soon followed, and the idea of Christ *as a principle*, was confounded with Christ *as a person*.

They thus adopted a figurative mode of expression, which might be taken literally, but which they also frequently allegorized

gorized—some in their manner of preaching leaned more to one mode of explanation, and some to the other; the result of which was as might be expected, a confused manner of expression, very liable to be misunderstood, so that frequently in addressing those of other societies, who were unacquainted with the peculiarity of their phrases, they were supposed to be preaching up Christ as a person, while in reality their aim was to direct to the inward manifestation of grace in the heart under the figure of Christ as a principle. It appears evident that it was in this manner in which they were generally understood, because when some broke through this ambiguous manner of expression, a loud cry of heresy and innovation was immediately raised against them.

The Quakers refused to adopt the term of trinity, because the word was not to be found in scripture, but many of them, although they startled at the use of the word, adopted the idea designed by that word: yet their opinions on this subject were never clearly defined. I do not charge them by any means with an intention to deceive, but their taking up the matter partly in a literal, and partly in a figurative sense, caused much ambiguity in their own ideas, and in their manner of expressing them. I think great care should be taken to express our sentiments in such clear, simple terms that they may not be liable to be misunderstood.

For a long time the society proceeded in this undeterminate mode of expression, and each adopted his own mode of explanation; but of late some believed it right for them to enquire closely into those subjects, and when the result of their enquiries diverged from commonly received opinions, they thought that candour compelled them to speak out without reserve, their sentiments on the subjects of the trinity, and the implicit reception of the scriptures throughout as the dictates of inspiration. They were much harassed for a while, sometimes by a kind of public opposition, and

and at other times by whisperings and insinuations proceeding from persons willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike. These things were borne for a while, but at length the time for separation appeared to be fully come, and a minority judged it right to secede. Several have accordingly withdrawn from the society, actuated by a sincere desire to enjoy liberty of conscience, and to profess what they believe to be truth, although their profession of it is attended with much reproach; they have not gained the praise of men, but some of them possess what is far better, the secret consciousness of their having acted under the influence of honest motives and upright intentions.

Since this secession has taken place, those who remain, as if to act more strongly in opposition to those who have seceded, appear to be getting more round to commonly received opinions—they gradually approach more to those sentiments which are accounted orthodox, and the distance by which they were formerly separated from the other sects appears to be lessening: they seem more willing to make a common cause with them in defending what some account the outworks of christianity, but which others, I think, with more propriety, esteem the strong holds of superstition. The preaching among this people is at present much turned into the channel of preaching up Christ as a person, and the doctrine of the atonement, while some still object to use this term of atonement: but this is only stumbling at words, and admitting the thing dressed up in other language. To me it looks probable that this sort of conduct will cause them to dwindle away into insignificance. Their predecessors made a noble stand against superstition; the Quakers of the present day as a body, are, in my judgment, letting fall the standard that was once held up by this society against the diversified stratagems of priestcraft, and they may probably by such conduct gain more general praise among the indiscriminating multitude, as they become more assimilated to them. The pre-

sent current of public opinion appears to be strongly set in against reformation, and the society of Quakers, we are warranted in asserting, from a careful examination of their late conduct, on many occasions, fully concur in the temper of the times. Instead of being as a city set upon a hill, whose light cannot be hid, I greatly fear for them, that they will become more and more an association of worldly minded formalists. I now speak of them in bulk, for they have still worthy upright characters among them. May these lay aside their unnecessary alarm about innovation, venture boldly to examine for themselves, and exercise a free and independent judgment: for by such means the light of truth would be likely to spread. Now many intrench themselves in the forms of their discipline, and suffer a few to think for them, to whose decisions they bow with implicit confidence; and thus the pursuit of gain is not interrupted by the task of reflection.

Some appear to be afraid of being put out of their synagogue, if they explicitly avow their sentiments. This reprehensible timidity often arises from those who suffer themselves to be actuated by it, not dwelling sufficiently under the salutary discipline of self-denial; for in this school only are the lessons of true christian courage to be learned, and in this school only we can learn to make the important distinction between a rash, hasty avowal of opinions on libertine principles, and that calm, steady firmness which is the result of serious examination.

But it is time that individuals should be aroused to see for themselves. I give those hints in love to the sinsere-hearted part of this community. They are the warning notices of a friend. May those concerned lay them to heart. Societies and systems have fallen and been succeeded by others. These may probably fall in their turn, but as individuals attend to the renovating principle of divine intelligence, each will be enabled to accomplish the work of his day.

ON

BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER,

SO CALLED.

THE society of whom I have been speaking, were honourably conspicuous in their steady opposition to those doctrines. The investigation of those subjects opens an extensive field for considering the use of ceremonial observances. I believe it will be found that an attachment to them has always proved hurtful, by tending to stop the progress of further improvement. We need not wonder at the general reception of ceremonies, when we consider how much easier it is to be in the most scrupulous observance of them, than to attend to the more difficult task of regulating our conduct by the principles of justice, mercy, and truth.

The Quakers attempted, by allegorizing or spiritualizing these observances, to get rid of a literal compliance with them. I am inclined to think that this ground is not strictly defensible. I acknowledge, for my part, that I am not able to justify the omission of them from the letter of scripture. I think there is no doubt but that both these rites were practised in the early ages of the christian church. The account is positively expressed, that Christ submitted to baptism, but so he did likewise to circumcision and some other ceremonials of the Jewish law. Some doubts have been expressed respecting the accuracy of some part of the command, said to be given by Jesus to baptize. Of this I am not competent to speak, because I never made the accuracy of the present existing copies of the scriptures an object of research. Those who have attended to this subject, have not been able to find manuscripts of an earlier

lier date than about the middle of the second century. What interpolations and corruptions took place in this long interval of more than one hundred years after the death of Christ, neither they nor I can tell. This circumstance is of sufficient weight with me to destroy my belief and implicit reception of them in bulk: yet I wish ever to make this important distinction, that rejecting a part does not necessarily lead to an entire unqualified rejection. Where, on careful examination, they appear to contradict important truths, I think it best to give them up, rather than close up the way for all further improvement, by adhering to them contrary to evidence.

As for the command for baptism, I find it written in the book, but I do not know on what authority it is written. It may have been inserted as an interpolation afterwards, (this I think is the more probable conjecture) or Christ may have permitted baptism for a season, in condescension to the weakness of his disciples, who appeared on many occasions to have been actuated by motives and prospects of things very different from those which influenced their great master.

What is called the last supper, appears to be nothing more than a rite frequently practised among the Jews. The expressions used by Christ are by no means clear, and it requires much of that ingenious sophistry which has often been used to wrest scripture to confirm a favourite system, to make them apply as a command of perpetual obligation for the performance of this rite.

Seeing the authority of scripture must, from various causes, be so uncertain, it appears necessary to go on other grounds, on which to found the propriety of an ordinance, besides the letter of scripture. To have the validity and authority of a precept of Christ, it ought to be consistent with the general tenor of his other doctrines, as far as we are able to collect and separate them from the mixed state, in which they have come down

down to us. The general tenor of his doctrines was, to lead from outward observances to practical virtues, to substitute the genuine religion of the heart, that morality which enters into every part of our manner of conducting ourselves in the place of the cold, lifeless system of the Scribes and Pharisees. Against their practices, the general aim of his ministerial labours was directed. Considering the outward state of the people he ministered to, he might suffer some things to pass unreproved for a time in the days of their ignorance; but I cannot think he sanctioned the continuation of those practices through after ages, in opposition to the whole tenor of his exhortations and example; and I prefer giving up a reliance on the letter of the text, to the admitting of the idea, that he commanded those practices, in opposition to the sentiments which he expressed openly and boldly on other occasions.

I revere the character of Christ, and receive his testimony as of a man endowed with supernatural gifts, and superior qualifications, for effectuating the purpose of his divine mission, which was to introduce, by precept and example, a more spiritual religion, formed entirely on the sure foundation of regulating the heart and the affections—a religion of practice, instead of one consisting in exterior shews and ceremonies, as it was then commonly practised. This outward shew of religion has been too generally substituted by many of his professed followers in the place of that which he taught: so that, comparing what passes with many for the christian religion, with the former modes, which it appeared to supplant, we can say little more, only that there has been a change of name, and some little diversity in the ceremonies, while the radical principle of an ostentatious, showy religion still remains. This, however, only proves, that the professed servants have not followed the example of Him, whom they call their master.

I have other reasons for not placing implicit confidence in some relations made in the scriptures, where they contradict themselves,

themselves, as they often do, and where they are inconsistent with the clear tenor of gospel truth. It appears that the disciples frequently misunderstood the meaning and the language of Jesus, even while he was present with them. May we not suppose that they were equally liable to make mistakes, after he was taken from them? If this be admitted, it then follows that they were fallible, like other men, and consequently liable to make errors in their accounts. Peter erred, when he denied his master. On another occasion, Paul withstood Peter to his face; and in this instance of diversity of sentiment, it must be admitted that both could not be right. I see no good reason to suppose, that they were not liable to err also in their writings.

Alterations or interpolations may also have been made by the subsequent copyists, through mistake, or design, during the interval which took place from the time of their being written, and the dates of the oldest existing copies; and these alterations may have readily taken place, when the manuscripts were scarce. It has been admitted that a material interpolation took place since, in the first epistle of John, when it was more difficult from the multiplicity of copies, which rendered detection more easy.

Besides, we find that the present collection was patched together some centuries after, by councils, who admitted and rejected at their pleasure. It is said there were one hundred and fifty gospels, out of which they selected the four they admitted. I have no confidence in the wisdom and candour of these councils, their conduct in many respects, and in particular the fierceness with which they persecuted those who differed from them, prove that they were not men of enlightened minds, or that their judgment ought to be trusted in their arbitrary decisions in what they rejected, and what they received. So that, upon considering all these circumstances, I do not hesitate to say, that where the language of scripture contradicts

contradicts clear, plain truth, I prefer the latter, and give up what comes to us in so questionable a shape.

Plain dealing is best—notwithstanding an explicit avowal of my sentiments may expose me to additional censure, I proceed to take a short review of the diversified contents of this volume. History forms a principal part. The early part of this history, appears to be much wrapped up in allegory, and I even venture to add, in fiction. The early history of all nations, is enveloped in much obscurity, and I think the Jewish story is as much so as any other. It appears strange to me, that an unlimited belief in its authenticity, should, in the opinion of many, be considered as an essential article of religion.

I particularly object to the Jewish history, because God is represented uniformly by their historians, as partial to their nation. It forms a model for sectarian prejudices in later times. Besides God is represented as commanding them to commit acts of violence and cruel revenge on the neighbouring nations. As a representation of ancient manners, this history may be interesting, and prove not uninstructive, if we are only careful to divest ourselves of implicit confidence in the relations of the writers, where they assert the interference of God, and attribute to him passions and motives according with their low and degrading ideas of Deity.

The law of Moses has been a fruitful source of errors, occasioned by its supposed divine original, and the strained allusions, which have been drawn from it. Here the abuse of figurative language has been abundantly displayed; and many have been the errors which have arisen from making its ceremonies typical representations of christian virtues. The allegory was relied on, and drawn out to fanciful allusions, while the moral was lost. Men grasped at the shadow, and lost the substance.

Other parts of the scriptures are poetical. Many of the psalms are beautiful effusions, containing sublime devotional sentiments; yet an attentive observer may perceive some alloy mixed with the sterling metal. I consider it as an error to claim for those writings such a high degree of implicit reception, as to preclude all attempts to examine into the nature of their contents.—Surely it is right to deliberate, before we assent. It appears to me that it was nothing short of enthusiasm in some, and of a resolution to receive without examination in others, that has ranked the Song of Solomon under the name of a divine mystery. Let it be viewed as it may as a poetical composition, I think it has no title to be considered as of divine original. Many of its figures are not consistent with decency; why then should we waste time in attempting to spiritualize a rhapsody most probably written with views of a very different nature? There is an over fondness for mysteries, and an unprofitable hunting after allegories.

I have no doubt but that some of the Jewish prophets were men possessed of much integrity and honest zeal; but not without the mixture of human frailties. I highly respect some of their characters, although I think errors appear in their conduct and writings. They often attempted to instruct by bold figures, and assumed an allegorical manner of giving instruction. This may have been adapted to the state of manners in their day; but at present, without due caution, leads into mistakes, and an unnecessary imitation of their style.

As the nature of language is fluctuating, and as each passing generation has phrases and a style in some manner peculiar to itself, I think it is most suitable to adopt that mode of expression which is best understood in the present state of language. Strong figures drawn from ancient manners have been greatly abused, and not unfrequently misunderstood. Let us return to a greater simplicity of speech in expressing our sentiments on religious subjects. By acting in this manner, we should be likely

ly to gain some important advantages, and we also would have more correct ideas ourselves, and convey them more clearly to others, if we accustomed ourselves to the use of language, of which we carefully examined the exact import.

Phrases may be handed down from one set of disputants to another, until they are repeated altogether in the manner of a parrot, without a proper discrimination.

I think the writings of those called evangelists, contain many interesting accounts; as do also the acts of the apostles. Yet I have many reasons for hesitating to give unqualified assent to all their relations, as well as to all the assertions in the writings of the apostles. Paul, in particular, uses terms hard to be understood. He had a fondness for mysticism and allegory, which often tended to mislead; and his writings in many cases appear to be deficient in clearness and simplicity. In my apprehension, he adhered too much to the learning of the Jews, and retained too many of their prejudices. Early prejudices have often a very powerful influence; and I think we may discover the man brought up at the feet of Gamaliel in Paul, after he became a disciple of Christ.

To this source may we not trace some of the early corruptions of Christianity? For under such management, christianity assumed too great a resemblance to the Jewish system, and like to this model, it became, to an injurious degree, a religion of ceremony and outward observations. Those called the fathers, in succeeding ages, still further helped forward this tendency. So that if we look to the systems taught by many under the name of christianity, the adherence to the genuine precepts of Christ forms but a very small part of the mixed mass—the pure wheat is almost lost in the chaff.

I think many difficulties will be cleared up, if we only agree to allow, that the fallibility which we are ready to admit to belong to mankind in their present state, attaches itself likewise to the writers of scripture. When this allowance is granted, nothing will be detracted from their real merit, but I think their writings may become more extensively beneficial in the search after truth. As matters are managed at present, their authority is often erroneously adduced to stop all further enquiry, and to silence the still small voice of wisdom urging us to make progress in the necessary work of serious research.

ON THE SUPPOSED INFLUENCE OF AN EVIL SPIRIT, OR THE DEVIL, TEMPTING MAN TO COMMIT EVIL.

This appears to me to be another error arising from the abuse of figurative language, and an unsatisfactory attempt to account for the proneness in human nature to do wrong. In my view, it by no means gives an explanation of the matter in question: it would be better in this case also to acknowledge our ignorance, than to erect a system to account for it, that tends to remove the responsibility of wrong conduct from man, which the idea of a powerful tempter, has a strong tendency to do.

The ideas of the influence of demons, or the possession of evil spirits appear to have been popular prejudices among the Jews in the days of Christ; much like the belief of second sight in Scotland, of witchcraft in New England, and other places, and of the fanciful train of fairies, elves, &c. among the uninstructed

structed in Ireland. Other places also have their share of these and similar popular delusions.

As mankind have become enlightened, these superstitious notions have gradually fallen into discredit. Some time ago, I thought rational ideas had prevailed on those subjects to a greater degree, than I have since found to be the case; but slowly retiring superstition has of late made strong struggles to resume its dominion over the human mind; and I fear it will be found, that it exists with greater influence, than some of the friends of liberal enquiry had some time ago supposed. Yet still I trust its power is lessened, and without indulging too much in visionary hopes, I trust it will continue to lessen, and that rational knowledge will more generally work its overthrow.

So far as knowledge has prevailed, superstitious notions have lost their hold; and more correct sentiments have, on some subjects, gained ground; although not so much as had been hoped for—and to this gradual progress of knowledge, it is owing, that the stories of the agency of preternatural appearances less readily now receive credit. Few now-a-days are hardy enough to advance accounts of such things on the grounds of pretended actual knowledge, because they expect they would not gain credit for their relations; but if there was a readiness to believe, I have no doubt but there would be numerous stories told with much plausibility and positiveness, to gratify this credulity. Let people but stretch their belief as to these things, and many would step forward to impose upon them—and on the contrary, when less ready assent is given, and mankind exercise their reason more, these stories gradually die away, or become a faint echo. We find in an age of darkness and credulity, vast numbers of legendary tales were invented to gratify this desire of affecting the marvellous, which so generally prevailed.

To probe inveterate errors fully, it requires to proceed with firmness, and to guard against too great a degree of timidity, and a fear of giving offence.

In the course of my examining into these matters, I have again to encounter the authority of scripture. The relation of Christ's temptation in the wilderness will be adduced against me. I answer without reserve, that I do not believe that the transaction happened, as it is recorded in the New Testament. It may have been intended as an allegory, or it may have been a popular tradition among the multitudes that for a season followed him from the love of novelty—from them it may have been taken up by the original writers, who, we may suppose, might possibly in some instances have erred in penning their relations; or what is still more likely, it may have been the fabrication of that after period, to which I have already more than once alluded, between the death of Christ and the middle of the second century, before the existence of the present copies of those writings. I admit that it may be impossible, by conjecture, to approach to any thing like to certainty, and therefore I wish to repress a disposition too curiously to speculate concerning it: but still I do not hesitate to reject the literal account. It carries improbability on the face of it, and although we must, from our present limited comprehension, be obliged to admit many things which we cannot account for, yet it may be possible, and I think has been the too common error, to carry the principle of implicit belief too far, in cases wherein we have the means within our power of forming a correct judgment.

Many things relating to our present mode of existence, to futurity, and to the nature and attributes of God, are above the reach of our comprehension to investigate, but it does not follow from thence, that they are contrary to reason. This appears to me to be an important distinction. Man ought not

to

to extend his attempts to see beyond his powers of sight; yet he may exercise his sight profitably in examining into such things as are within its reach. He ought not to attempt to exercise reason on speculations respecting which it is beyond the reach of reason to direct his search; but he is not required to relinquish reason in examining into such things as it is competent to enable him to find out. Reason is a divine gift—it may be abused; but if kept within its proper sphere, it is a useful and necessary guide to us.

It may be further objected, that Christ, by some of his expressions appeared to sanction a belief in the existence of the devil. I admit that this was the case, if we have his expressions accurately recorded; but of this I have endeavoured to shew that great doubts may be entertained. He might have spoken according to the commonly received prejudices of those to whom he was addressing himself, without attempting to set them right on those points; for in regard to them, mistakes were of less consequence, than practical errors of conduct. He might also have not seen through these prejudices, and his exemption from them and some human frailties may have formed no part of the divine economy of his mission. This latter circumstance may make against the idea of those who receive him as God, but in no wise affects those who view him as a chief messenger and chosen servant of God.

I think the idea of a devil may be traced to the abuse of figurative language. It was a clumsy attempt to personify the evil dispositions in man. The Mosaic account of the fall gave sanction to this allegory, and the current opinions of the Jews in the days of Christ, still farther strengthened it. It may be truly said, that the greater part of the mighty fabric of imposture that took-place in succeeding ages, was formed after the model of scripture. I have freely expressed my thoughts on the degree of credit which should be attached to scripture evidence.

dence. It ought to be carefully weighed, and neither received nor rejected without due examination. In the present case I cannot receive its testimony in an unqualified manner.

I do not believe that any malignant spirit is tempting me, and desirous to work my downfal. The only temptation whose power we have to dread, arises from the influence of our own passions and unsubjected wills, and if we struggle with earnestness to keep this devil or evil spirit from leading us wrong, we have nothing to fear either from the attacks or temptations of an external agent in leading us astray. I fully admit the testimony of James in this case, when he says, " Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of *his own* lust, and enticed."—James I. 14.

I have endeavoured thus freely, but I trust not rashly, to pluck up some popular errors, or what I consider to be such. I know the many have their minds closed up against the reception of such things. I write, because I think it a duty to contribute my small efforts to the overthrow of the mighty fabric of superstition. Even now a few may be willing to examine for themselves, and I trust the number of serious enquirers will increase—who will examine for themselves, prove all things, and only hold fast that which is good.

The cause of enquiry has been taken up by many persons on various grounds. We ought not to be frightened from narrowly examining for ourselves, because some of ungodly lives, and others whose reputation have in some cases been unjustly blasted by the breath of calumny, have gone before in this work. I do not appear as the apologist for any set of men; but I earnestly desire that truth may be followed for its own sake, let it be received or rejected by whom it may. I do not intentionally advance any thing that I believe is not consistent with truth. In some cases I may be mistaken, and therefore I do not call

call upon my readers to receive, but only impartially and without prejudice to examine what I advance. If they begin and continue the search with proper dispositions, let it terminate as it may with regard to opinions, they may be benefited by their minds being habituated to serious reflection: it may lead to a more intimate acquaintance with themselves, and teach them justly to estimate their own frailties, and the limited state of their comprehensions.

We appear to be nearly arrived at an important crisis. Superstition is making strong efforts to hold its sway over the minds of men—a spirit of enquiry is raised; it is not extinct, though it may seem to sleep—old usages are not likely much longer to retain their former hold over the minds of men. If establishments and sects continue to throw obstacles in the way of enquiry, as seems to be their present aim, they may obstruct its course for a time, but they cannot ultimately resist the force of it.

Religion, from the abuse of its professors, is with many almost become a title of reproach, and in many cases it must be admitted, that there is too much ground for the reproach being taken up. I wish to see genuine religion flourish, and that every thing which obstructs the progress of it may be removed—that true knowledge may spread and increase, and that no longer it may be said, that ignorance is the mother of devotion. Ignorance certainly is the parent of superstition; but piety and virtue, which may be emphatically called godliness, arise from a just knowledge of our duties, and a lively, ardent desire to fulfil them. I thus conclude my present labour with expressing the effusions of my heart, and my earnest desires for the promotion of real practical religion, and of a more strict and comprehensive morality consistent with its precepts.

Lisburn: *9th of 1st month*, 1803.

POST-

POSTSCRIPT.

THEY who delight in verbal criticism may, it is possible, find some of their favourite amusement in the perusal of the foregoing pages; for I was unwilling, by attempting to refine the style too much, to risque the enfeebling of the sentiments which I rather chose to express in strong but unadorned language, as what might be gained by refinement might be lost in strength. I seek not for reputation from a highly polished style, or flowing periods; my aim is to encourage a disposition to enquire, and for this purpose I have endeavoured to bring before my readers some considerations which I think contain important truths: yet, throughout, I wish carefully to avoid speaking in a dogmatical, authoritative manner, not from the affectation of modesty, but from a conviction of the necessity of speaking with becoming diffidence on subjects of which but little is known, and much remains to be known; for after all that has been said and written on religious subjects, a disposition to liberal and candid enquiry is, in my estimation, yet in its infancy.

I have, however, endeavoured to guard against downright carelessness in my manner of expressing myself. Of deficiency in one respect I am sensible. Having been accustomed formerly to the phraseology of a sect, in some cases I may have failed in expressing myself in terms sufficiently clear to the general reader. I have used some endeavours to divest myself of this phraseology, but where I have inadvertently failed, I request the candid reader to excuse me. It is difficult to change entirely our former modes of expression, and to break through the old association of terms, so as to be fully understood by those whose trains of ideas and turns of expression are different.

While

While these pages have been in the press, I have made several additions, which are inserted in their respective places. I fear in one or two instances they may have broken in upon the more regular connection. To prevent further interruption of this kind, I think it may be better to subjoin some additional remarks which I am disposed to make, by way of notes, with reference to the passages in the body of the work, to which they immediately relate.

Page 8, line 3.—[God represented as acting under the influence of human passions.]

To the idea of ascribing human passions to God, may, in my judgment, be traced the doctrines of election and reprobation. God is represented under the figure of a king, from hence the transition to the abuse of the figure, in supposing him to act with despotic sway was easy. He elected some and rejected others, of his own good pleasure.

John Calvin, when closely pressed in his support of these doctrines, might well call it *a horrible decree*. It appeared to be under the irresistible influence of truth operating on his mind, for the moment, that he made this declaration, although he speedily lost the impression, in his fondness for his favourite dogma. Without presuming to scan the ways of God in his moral government of the world, I cannot but feel repugnance at such erroneous misrepresentations as are held out in these and similar doctrines. But such has ever been the case, when man has attempted to explore beyond the reach of his understanding. Let us in humility, the result of a consciousness of our imperfect knowledge, leave those things which we do not understand, and which do not concern us, and trust with confidence that all will be ordered for the best, both for the particular and for the general good, although shortsighted as we are, we cannot see the hand which directs the whole. It is wisdom to confess our ignorance, and not to attempt, by imperfect reasonings, to account

for those things which we cannot comprehend. In dutiful submission, let us cease from a desire to pry into the unsearchable designs of God in the government of his creation. By indulging ourselves in false reasonings, and by attributing motives to him, which we see to be ruling passions in ourselves and our fellow men, we depart widely from forming just ideas of the great Supreme.

Page 19, line 11.—[The consoling hopes of immortality.] Objects frequently appear to us very different from the medium through which they are viewed. To me the soul-solacing hope of an immortality, such as a Being of infinite power and infinite goodness shall appoint, affords the greatest comfort in the diversified scenes of good and evil in this life; and without it, life would appear a burden. I think some err in requiring mathematical demonstration on a subject incapable of such proof. We know little with certainty of our present mode of existence. What gives us the power of motion and volition is incomprehensible to us, yet we know we do exist. So, although we know nothing of the manner in which we shall exist hereafter, I find no rational cause to doubt that we shall exist in some manner consistent with the divine economy. I avoid prying into the manner of this existence, but content myself with a firm conviction of the certainty of it deeply impressed upon my mind.

Disputes about the manner, have a tendency to shake the belief in the reality of a future state, because men then dispute about what they do not understand, and may thus be led to give too much scope to doubting. I am fearful that disputes about the doctrines of materiality and immateriality, and other incomprehensible points of this nature, have had a tendency to bewilder. When an error has been long taught, it often happens that another error is brought forward to oppose it. In such cases will it not be better to avoid entering into a discussion, or an attempt to weigh error against error? The learning of the schools abounds

abounds too much in this unproductive labour. A shorter course appears to me, to examine what is truth, without looking much to what others have said either for or against certain opinions. To begin on new ground, without regarding former controversies, would greatly promote the elucidation of many difficult subjects, which have been obscured by the former manner of treating them.

The doctrine generally maintained by the Unitarians, that the grounds of a belief in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, are only to be found in the scriptures, has also a tendency to shake a belief in this important doctrine, when doubts are entertained of the entire inspiration of the scriptures. These writings do not clear up the difficulties which present themselves to my mind; but I think the doctrine is established on surer grounds than on the authority of a book: it is written legibly in many of the characters of the human mind. If we are careful to endeavour to live godly lives, to make such a hope consolatory to us, and do not puzzle ourselves with too curious metaphysical distinctions, and looking for stronger evidence than is consistent with our present imperfect knowledge, we shall not be likely to be long or permanently distressed with doubts on this subject.

Page 35, line 10.—[Figurative language has corrupted the genuine simplicity of the gospel.]

I doubt very much the propriety of attempting to express our ideas by figures drawn from ancient manners as represented in the scriptures. This practice often leads to great inaccuracy. Some very horrid representations and bloody scenes in war have been allegorized: but where is the benefit to be found in using this figurative language? I perceive many dangerous errors which have arisen from this practice. We might find more simple terms in which to convey the truths of genuine religion, than in the overstrained and far-fetched language of metaphor, often drawn from the wicked deeds recorded in a blood-stained history. The account of the wars recorded in the historical parts

parts of the scripture, is aggravated by the assertion frequently repeated, that they were undertaken by divine command. So far the relations of them is more injurious, and has a more powerful tendency to strengthen practical sentiments for war than those recorded in other histories, where this assertion is not made. Can a mind, deeply impressed with a belief that God changes not, and that wars are unlawful, consent to draw figurative allusions from those wars of former times? Much of palliation may be admitted, when it was practised without reflection; but I think, continuing in it after the error has been pointed out, through an obstinate adherence to former custom, must injure the delicate feelings of integrity in those who still persist. I particularly allude to the practice of many preachers among a people professing to hold war to be unlawful. I think it would be of great advantage if a change of style, less figurative, were adopted in speaking of religious subjects. It would also obviate many difficulties, if all allusions to metaphors and an adherence to a set of phrases learned by rote were dropt, and simple truth expressed in simple terms, such as might be suggested by the occasion.

I fear many keep themselves and their hearers from properly comprehending religious truths, by dealing so much in ambiguity, arising from the use of figure. In my apprehension the purposes of real improvement would be better answered by using expressions less hackneyed, and which, by being so often repeated, convey no very determinate meaning, but rather tend to mislead and perplex. Is it not a very unsuitable mode of conveying instruction, in representing the internal struggles of mind necessary against the temptations of our passions, to borrow the language used in the accounts of the Jewish wars? I think the simply stating, in plain terms, the necessity of this struggle would be much preferable, as being more intelligible, instead of obscuring the advice by wrapping it up in metaphor. The duty of humility, so necessary to man in his present

sent state, might also be expressed, I think, in more suitable terms than are generally made use of. To shew a man that he ought to think with humility of himself, it is not necessary to tell him that his nature is depraved, because Adam and Eve are supposed to have disobeyed a particular command.

The advocates for ancient systems, and the prescriptive authority of the Bible, will retard this necessary reform of the manner of expression for a season, but I believe the time will come for a change, as men advance more in the knowledge of true religion. I am fully sensible that the present time is unfavourable for reform—the adherents to old systems are making violent efforts to keep them up—some of the friends of liberal enquiry are hesitating and lukewarm, and very many of the inhabitants of these countries are ingrossed with worldly concerns, to the exclusion of serious reflection, while others adopt the trivialities of the learning of the schools, which is more conversant in words than in ideas. From these various causes, the interests of a pure comprehensive morality are overlooked—a morality which takes in the whole circle of our duties, and is found to be the very essence of religion; for religion is not a system of belief respecting external matters, but is, in reality, that vital, energetic principle in the human mind, which influences to good works on right motives.

Many disputes have arisen respecting the terms, religion, morality, faith, atonement, satisfaction, &c. which have been highly aggravated by the debates respecting them being maintained in scripture phrases, and by the abuse of figurative language, because the disputants on each side sought to strengthen themselves by attempting to force particular texts of scripture into their service, instead of examining into the nature of the doctrines they attacked or defended. The trial of skill generally consisted in the parties sheltering themselves, and galling their opponents by texts of scripture, often misapplied and misunderstood.

stood. These disputes might have been more easily settled if other language had been applied, and those phrases about which they contended, resolved into other terms—for scripture is not found to have the tendency to put an end to controversy. Scripture has been brought against scripture, and these points still remain unsettled.

The term theology has a meaning affixed to it by many, distinct from morality, and in the language of controversialists, is made to consist in a system of belief in certain mysteries, which even the propounders of them do not understand. Religion would, in my estimation, derive most important advantages, if the terms used in writing or speaking concerning it were rendered more simple, and at the same time more significant of the real meaning intended to be conveyed, and if every one would speak in terms consistent with the state of knowledge to which he has attained, instead of using the words of other men without trying and proving the meaning of them for himself. Many now appear eloquent in borrowed expressions; but if each only expressed what he himself had actually experienced, true knowledge would take place of the superficial smattering now too prevalent. Religion would not then be a mere theme for declamation, but people, instead of being only professors of it, would feel its *obligations*, and in good earnest set about reforming their practices by its precepts. The superficial professor may know speculatively what is right, but the true christian with the greatest earnestness endeavours to practice it.

I do not scruple to avow my full persuasion, that a new system will gradually take place, and that the change will be beneficial to the best interests of mankind—that the manner of expressing ideas on religious subjects will be altered, and instead of the dogmas of theological creeds, a strict and comprehensive morality will be unfolded.

Man, both in what is called the higher, the middle, and the lower classes of society, man in the state of an over refined

and artificial civilization, and man in an uncivilized state, speaking in general terms, exhibit deplorable depravation. If we look around us, we must acknowledge that, in every rank, the state of manners is miserably corrupted; and so general is this corruption, that it is not a little difficult to determine with impartiality, which class of society is the worst. In looking for a cause for these effects, may it not be found in the systems taught for religion?

Belief in creeds and points of a speculative nature, and in the peculiar doctrines of the different sects, forms, in the estimation of most, the essence of true religion. Propriety of conduct is nominally made a part of the system; but we may see, that by most churches, an orthodox belief in their respective systems is more insisted on, than purity of conduct. If their members acknowledge the popular belief, irregularities in conduct are more readily passed over. This shews what is held in most esteem by many.

The change which I earnestly wish to see, is, that leaving knotty points of speculative opinions, greater attention may be paid to the punctual discharge of our several social and relative duties. Thus, if the objects of religious instruction were changed, of course there would be a change of the terms expressive of what will appear to the enlightened mind, to be the proper duties of morality and religion, no longer separated, but intimately blended and incorporated together. The religion generally current in the world, is an assent to certain traditions, often disguised by figures, and wrapt up in mystery; and the world's morality is often only a superficial varnish, which is rather calculated to hide defects, than to remove them.

The union of religion and morality is described by Christ, as consisting in loving God, and making this love the actuating principle of universal practical benevolence and good will

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to our fellow men.—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind"—and "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments, hang all the law and the prophets."

I venerate these heavenly precepts, although I cannot receive many things recorded in the volume of the Old and New Testament. I endeavour to discriminate, and do not rashly reject the whole. In these memorable expressions, we have a truly comprehensive system of pure morality, which is indeed the essence of true religion.

Page 56.—[A more strict and comprehensive morality, consistent with the precepts of practical religion.]

It would be promotive of real advantage to mankind, if a pure, enlightened, and scrupulous morality were more generally considered as the foundation of religion—and if people were taught to consider religion not as consisting in a belief of theological dogmas, or an adherence to forms. A very lax morality has been the consequence of the system, which has too commonly prevailed; and many of the strenuous supporters of reputed orthodoxy of opinions, have satisfied themselves with great laxity of practice as to pure morals.

The object which I feel nearest my heart to promote, is a correct morality founded on the true principles of piety and virtue, such as we should always find to operate as a check in regulating our intercourse with mankind; and whose precepts should be a guide to us in every action of our lives. If this comprehensive morality prevailed, selfishness, and the long train of passions would be removed, which now, sometimes under the mask of hypocrisy, and sometimes without it, disturb the peace of mankind, and instead of that system of fraud, which causes man in various ways to prey on man, mutual confidence would be restored. It would restrain not only the grosser vices, but also the errors of conduct, which, though acknowledged

ledged to be wrong, are yet too frequently indulged in with complacency.

I at times please myself in the hopes, that my wishes for the amelioration of the state of man will not prove visionary; but I believe if the prospects of substantial reform are ever realised, an entire new mode in the manner and the terms of giving instruction must precede. I trust the time will come, that the genuine principles of religion, as consisting in an amended and rectified morality will be more fully published to the world, by disinterested advocates for its propagation. Many teachers now have a selfish interest in upholding systems, from which they derive consequence and emolument. If pure morality prevailed, this hurtful tendency to selfishness would be done away in every class; and errors would not be upheld for the sake of the profit extracted from them.

If we made it our endeavour to do what is right on the broad scale, without looking too much to present advantages, it would have a tendency to do away selfishness; and acting justly in the strict sense of the word, in our several relations, would go far to produce a spirit of peace in ourselves. The effects would probably reach to others, with whom we are connected; and by such means much mutual provocation would be avoided.

I admit the liability of man continually to err, from the violence of his passions; and that therefore watchfulness, and an earnest struggle, are necessary as a counterpoise—but with all the draw-backs from the weakness of human nature, the benefits of a corrected morality are, in my apprehension, incalculable.

I hope these hints may draw some to reflect more seriously on this matter. Perhaps, at a future time, I may venture to give to the public some additional observations, more particularly expressive of my ideas, relating to this interesting subject.

In drawing towards a conclusion, I anticipate an objection that may probably be made—that my aim in the foregoing pages has been entirely to pull down—to raise doubts, without bringing forward any thing like certainty. I answer, that I write according to my present knowledge or apprehension. In expressing my thoughts, I had no settled plan. I wrote from my present view of things; and if I should hereafter see occasion either to extend my views or alter my sentiments, I hope I shall be willing to do it. I object to the old systems, as extremely defective in many important respects; yet I have formed no new system. I think it most conducive to the interests of truth, to keep my mind open to further convictions, and to recommend it to my readers to do the same.

In the search after truth, it is necessary to guard against determining beforehand, what shall be the result of the enquiry, or how far we shall go; nor should we give way to unprofitable fears, that this enquiry may lead us too far from commonly received opinions. If the enquiry be conducted on serious principles, with becoming caution and diffidence of our abilities to make the discovery, we ought to be willing to follow truth, wherever we may be convinced it appears.

While we admit the fallibility of our judgment, we must also bear in mind, that men of high authority may also have failed to discover what is right in every particular; and that therefore it is unsafe to admit them as guides in all things. "Great men are not always wise, neither do the aged always understand judgment;" and it is possible to err as much in leaning to the judgments of others, as in depending upon our own judgment.

I think the subjects brought under review in this pamphlet, are of great importance; and if objects were rightly estimated according to their value, they would obtain more general consideration than is now the case; because mistaken ideas concern-

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ing them have a powerful influence over our conduct. I know that opinions, however well founded, are of no weight, if they are unaccompanied by right practice; but we should be careful that errors in opinion should not be brought to justify errors of conduct, any more than that right opinions should be held as substitutes for right conduct. A due medium ought to be observed, between the indolent indifference to opinions, whether they are right or wrong, and the endeavour to exalt opinions as being more essential than practice. When I speak of their relative importance, I wish to be understood in this sense, as recommending neither indifference to them, nor too great a reliance on them; for a tendency to the latter has often produced fierce contentions, which have proved destructive to the real interests of religion. While on the other hand, in the present situation of things, the minds of too many are *criminally* absorbed, in the over anxious pursuit of gain or of pleasure; and from these causes they are sunk into a state of apathy and listlessness with regard to the earnest enquiry, by what rules their conduct, in every instance of life, should be regulated, in order that they may faithfully fulfil the comprehensive duties of "doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly."

I cannot but consider it as criminal to devote too much of our attention to the sordid pursuit of gain, or the intoxicating allurements of pleasure; both of which I think are equally prejudicial to the acquiring and cherishing of proper dispositions of mind, to enquire after, and to discharge our several duties.

If the mind is too much occupied in either of those pursuits, many selfish passions will be engendered, and hurtful habits formed, which will incapacitate us from experiencing those tempers being produced in us, which are the solid foundation of the christian virtues. It appears to me to be an important truth, very necessary to be frequently inculcated, that, from various causes, the minds of many are too much engrossed with wordly

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cares, to the injury of their finer feelings. I think this error has not in general been sufficiently pointed out, nor seen in its proper light. Therefore, although the remark may be abruptly introduced, I think it best to make it in this place, and earnestly to press it upon the consideration of all whom it may concern, that there are higher and more important employments for beings such as man, than to have almost the entire bent of their faculties turned to such pursuits.

To provide for our necessary accommodation in this life, is a duty; but it is only a secondary duty, and should not usurp the place of our primary duties—"our being's end and aim." If we reduced our desires to proper bounds, our wants would be few.

The proper business of life is to regulate our passions, reform our hearts, and struggle to subdue the propensities to evil, as beings, who look forward to a better inheritance beyond the grave, and who consider this world only as a lower link in the scale of existence, appointed for us as a place of trial, by the Almighty Creator of the universe; and in the boundless space of whose creation, this world is but as a speck. I wind up these remarks, with feelings of humble awe, arising from these considerations, and of unfeigned good will towards all of every nation and country, however divided into sects, or diversified by outward appearance.

It is impossible, in the present state of the world, that all will think alike; but where we cannot join in sentiment, let us cherish a disposition to mutual forbearance. Let us endeavour after uniformity in acts of kindness and benevolence to our fellows; but with regard to creeds and opinions, where a diversity prevails, let us charitably agree to differ.

If any think I have expressed myself harshly in any of my remarks, I can with sincerity say, that I had no intention to do

do so. However I may differ in sentiment from many, I feel a disposition to follow after peace with all men. I dislike war, and I equally disapprove of the asperities of controversy. I desire not to give offence to any; but I think it would be shrinking from a duty to suppress my sentiments from a coward's fear of giving offence. A conscientious mind cannot so easily give up the result of earnest enquiry. Such a search cost much anxiety, and ought not to be parted with in compliance with popular prejudices, often arising from persons much engrossed with other pursuits, and who have not deliberately and calmly enquired for themselves, but have hastily adopted the popular opinions without examination. If any let in resentment against me on account of my freely telling my sentiments, I must bear their reproaches. I desire to do it patiently. I know it is my duty to do so, whether I may come up in the practice of it or not. The holy pattern of christian purity "when he was reviled, reviled not again, and when he suffered, threatened not;" and this disposition I recommend to be sought after by all who may speak or write on religious subjects. In this let us endeavour to agree, notwithstanding we may widely differ on other points.

THE END.

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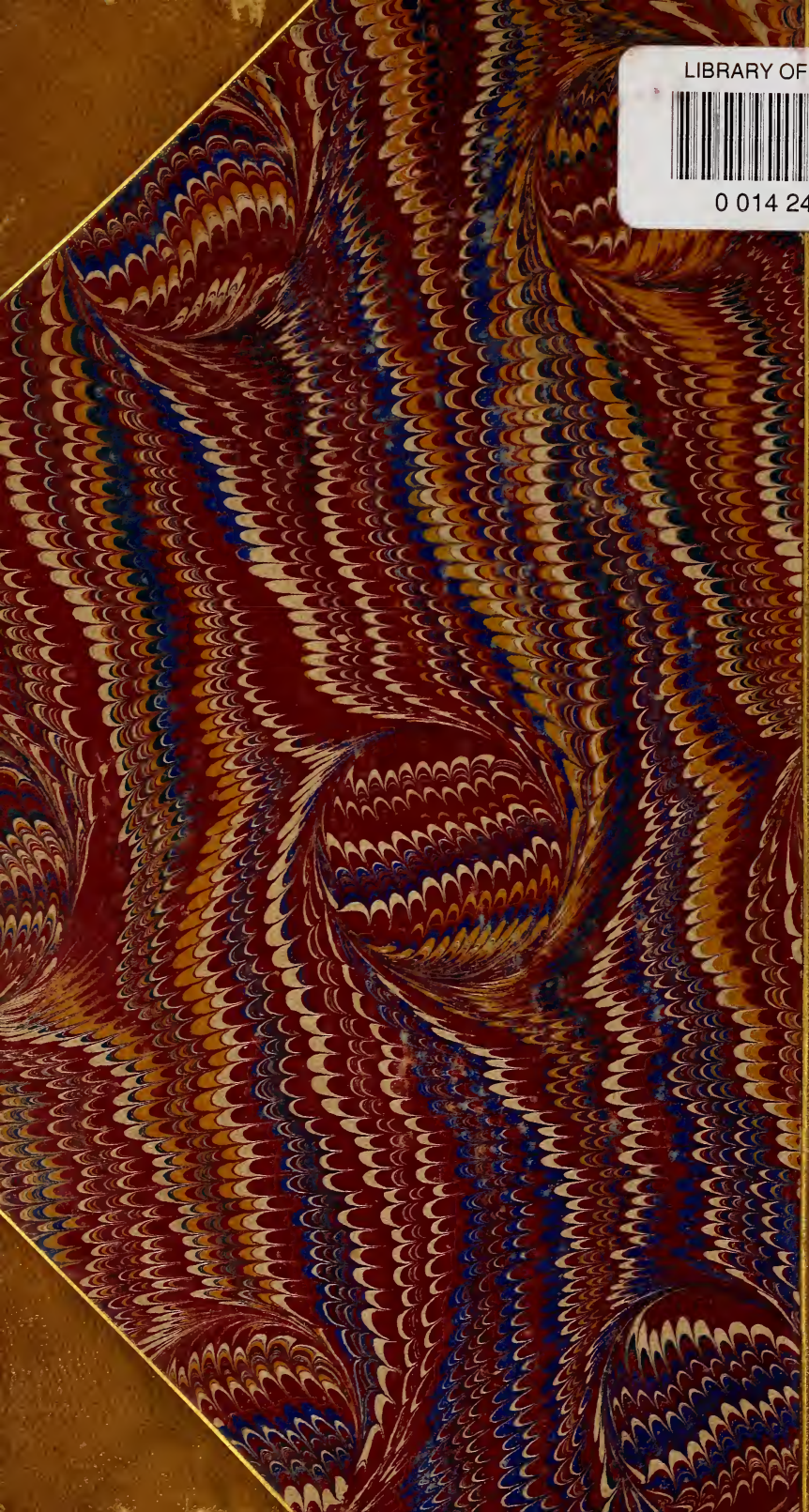
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